



Englishman in New Jersey

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When Peter Oates graduated from nursing school in 1975 in his native England, the AIDS crisis was on the distant horizon.

Oates's first years as a nurse were largely spent caring for older adults, first in the Netherlands and then in England. His patients included Lord John Spencer, Princess Diana's father.

"I started doing private-duty nursing until I could find a job that I really liked," Oates says. "It was during that period that I got a call from the agency to say, 'Go take care of this guy.' I didn't know who he was." Lord Spencer had had a stroke, and Oates remained with him full time until his recovery.

An intense bond formed between the caretaker and the Spencer family. Oates even attended Prince Charles and Diana's wedding in 1981 and kept in contact with Princess Diana until her death.

And after Lord Spencer's convalescence, the Spencers treated Oates to a vacation. He chose to visit San Francisco in 1980 for about a month. He liked it so much that he soon decided to return.

"I went back to San Francisco in 1983, and I got my nursing license in California during that period," Oates says. "I volunteered, and I saw the community being devastated by AIDS. During that time, I went for an interview at San Francisco General Hospital's brand-new AIDS unit. Unfortunately, they weren't hiring foreign nurses at the time."

That's a long and ironic story considering foreign-born nurses are now the backbone of America's health care system.

Oates began working as an AIDS nurse in 1994, the same year he tested positive for HIV. By then, he had settled in New Jersey. Oates handled his HIV diagnosis in the most British way possible: with a stiff upper lip. Caring for others helped too.

"I have to honestly say, I just accepted it and thought, I'm going to take care of this," Oates says. "I took my pills and didn't think about it. The patients helped me work through that. It's like you've got a job to do—get on with it."

In 2022, Oates retired from full-time nursing as director of health care services at the Francois-Xavier Bagnoud Center at the Rutgers University School of Nursing. He continues to serve on the board of the Association of Nurses in AIDS Care, which recently honored him with a lifetime achievement award.

Upon his retirement, Oates was also lauded by Hyacinth, New Jersey's largest and oldest AIDS service organization.

"New Jersey has been so lucky to have Peter Oates find his way to us," says Kathy O'Brien, Hyacinth's executive director. "He has been fiercely fighting to end the HIV epidemic since its earliest days. Peter is smart, funny and down-to-earth—all qualities that have endeared him to the HIV community in New Jersey. He is passionate about inequalities in health care. Peter has never sought the limelight—he's the guy getting the work done each and every day."

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